

INSIDE REPORT: The Cuba Expert

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By Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

IT WAS Washington at its wackiest when Sen. Kenneth Keating parlayed a few tips, a hard working staff and unlimited gall into overnight recognition as the nation's No. 1 Cuba expert.

In fact, the source of the New York Republican's apparently endless inside knowledge about Soviet operations behind the Castro curtain remains Washington's best-kept secret. To this very day, the White House is dying to know about Keating's "government leak."

The answer is hilariously simple: he had no direct government informants.

Keating's chief source was a friendly newspaper correspondent who gave his remarkably reliable tips to Keating after—not before—the information appeared in his own newspaper back home. The full story of this magnificent political coup which brought national prominence to the Senator can now be told.

It began on Friday, Aug. 31, last year, just before the Labor Day week end. Though not regarded then as a Cuban specialist, Keating was about to give a routine Senate speech pummeling President Kennedy for the Soviet presence in Cuba.

Then came a telephone call to Keating from the friendly newsman, who works for an Eastern newspaper not generally read in Washington. He told the Senator about a story he had written for the Aug. 29 edition. Obviously based on official intelligence sources, his dis-

patch told of 1,200 Russian troops unloaded at the Cuban port of Mariel at a time when Mr. Kennedy was insisting that only Soviet "technicians" were on Cuban soil. This was a bombshell—and Keating knew it. He shunted aside his prepared speech.

"This morning—after my comments had been prepared—new and extremely disturbing information came to my attention," Keating told the Senate. "I believe it should be reported to this body at once." Without identifying the source, he then proceeded to paraphrase the newspaper story that had appeared two days earlier.

This won Keating a quick invitation from NBC's "Today" show for Tuesday, Sept. 4. On Labor Day morning, Sept. 3, Keating read a story in the New York Herald Tribune (by Keith Morfett of The London Daily Mail) reporting that 5,000 to 8,000 Russian soldiers had arrived in Cuba. Combining this material with his Aug. 31 speech, Keating was a smash hit on "Today."

The Kennedy administration panicked.

Within the next few months, John McCone, director of Central Intelligence, made three special trips to Keating's office. Keating was invited to lunch with Secretary of State Dean Rusk.

"Who is Keating's source" became Washington's favorite guessing game. Some liberal Democrats hinted darkly that McCone, a Republican, was the leak. Others assumed that Reserve Army Gen. Keating was tapping Pentagon sources.

Only Keating's 80-member staff knew the truth. The "Keating Intelligence Agency" was simplicity itself. It pruned published sources, checked through normal government channels of communication, snared minor tidbits of information from refugee leaders. But above all, it scrutinized the stories of that Eastern reporter.

Sometimes his staff broke down in paroxysms of giggling over the gullibility of Washington. Sometimes they worried about the balloon bursting.

But the balloon stayed up.

Keating seemed even more omniscient when he told the Senate Oct. 10 that "construction has begun on at least a half-dozen launching sites for intermediate range tactical missiles"—information confirmed by the President 12 days later when the Cuban crisis began. Actually, Keating's speech was cribbed from an Oct. 7 article by Hal Hendrix in The Miami Daily News, which a reader mailed to Keating in time for his speech.

Keating's record for accuracy was flawless until Jan. 31, when he based a speech on a Jan. 29 story by his Eastern reporter friend. This time he went beyond the reporter's information in declaring that the Soviets were still maintaining concrete launching sites in Cuba.

Keating was wrong—for the first time. But nobody really cared. In the wonderland of Washington, his credentials as a Cuba expert were by now impeccable.